Remember elementary school? What was that like? Did you have a lot of friends? Did you enjoy it? Or was school a place you hated to be, where kids were unkind?

If you are like me, it was sometimes one and sometimes the other. I remember fifth grade as a time when I learned a lot, enjoyed learning and had a lot of friends. Then there was sixth grade, where one kid always had something nasty to say to me. I lost sleep over him.

My mother told me I should pay him a compliment. I tried that, but he was on to such tactics. He said something like, "You are just saying that to try to get me to be nice to you."

A lot kids have it a lot worse than I did. Gabrielle Molina, a 12-year-old girl in New York City, committed suicide in May after being picked on repeatedly.

And it isn't just in New York City. Julie Rusby and her colleagues at the Oregon Research Institute studied harassment in two middle schools here in Oregon. Seventy-one percent of the boys and 43 percent of the girls in middle school were harassed physically. Boys were harassed about two times in every three-day period. Girls said they were harassed about once every four days. The rates were lower in high school.

Shawn Boles analyzed the statewide data we collected at ORI. We found that 14 percent of eighth-graders were depressed and 8 percent had attempted suicide in the past year.

A reaction to these sad statistics may be that we need to clamp down on teasing and harassment. Zero tolerance! In fact, one of the main ways we humans have learned to deal with behavior we don't like is to punish it.

It is a natural reaction: A student misbehaves, and the teacher admonishes. If the student stops doing what they were doing, the teacher is reinforced for admonishing.

Unfortunately, this kind of attention is as likely to reinforce student misbehavior as discourage it. In the last 40 years, scientists in Oregon and elsewhere learned that students may stop for the moment, but they are a bit more likely to engage in the annoying or disruptive behavior.

If it gets the attention of other students or gets them out of doing school work that they have trouble doing, they do it more often. As a result, schools drift toward escalating levels of punishment.

Alas, punishment doesn't work very well. It stresses people in ways that contribute to further problems. It can even cause physical illness. And it doesn't help students learn what they could do that would work better for them and those around them.

Roy Mayer, a behavior analyst at Cal State Los Angeles, studied schools in Southern California. He found that schools with the highest rates of misbehavior also were the schools with the most rules and punishment. The tendency to increase punishment and make more rules in the face of unwanted behavior led to more misbehavior, which lead to more punishment. And students learned less in these stressful environments.

The antidote is to help schools teach and reinforce cooperative behavior. Thankfully, research over the past 30 years has led to strategies that are helping schools do just that.

One of the best examples of these developments is School-Wide Positive Behavior and Support, or SWPBS. It was developed at the University of Oregon and is being implemented in more than 18,000 schools around the country.

The primary developers of SWPBS are Rob Horner and George Sugai. They have devoted much of their careers to finding ways to help schools replace punitive practices with positive ways to help students develop the skills they need to succeed in school — and in life.

They began as specialists working with students with severe behavior problems. They got quite good at designing programs to help children learn to concentrate on their school work, restrain impulses to be aggressive and cooperate with others. Their work has led to much less use of punishment and much more success for the students.

But over time, Horner and Sugai realized that concentrating only on the most severe problems did little to prevent other students from developing problems and did not address the milder problems that many students have. They developed School-Wide Positive Behavior Support program to ensure that the entire population of students would succeed.

SWPBS involves a team of school leaders developing a small number of clear rules for positive behavior and setting up a system to richly reinforce students when they follow those rules. Common rules are "be respectful," "be responsible" and "be cooperative." Rather than waiting until students figure out what these rules mean, students are taught what it means to act in these ways in each of the settings of the school — the classroom, the halls, the restrooms, the playground, etc.

For example, one teacher taught her students that in her classroom, being respectful meant raising your hand and waiting for permission to speak. Being responsible meant, in part, turning in completed assignments on time.

In most schools, the system for reinforcing rule-following involves rewards students get in the form of tickets or scrip that they can trade in for items at a school store. However, schools have many other ways to recognize the good efforts of students, such as display of their work around the school, public recognition of their efforts and simply warm greetings when they arrive in the classroom.

A key part of SWPBS is a system for monitoring problem behavior throughout the school. The leadership team uses the data to know where there are hot spots that need special attention and to gauge how well their system is working.

Research on the value of SWPBS is quite encouraging. Randomized experimental evaluations have shown that when schools implement SWPBS they reduce disruptive behavior, improve academic performance, increase students' sense of safety and reduce teachers' distress.

SWPBS is another example of how we can make our environments more nurturing for everyone in them. There is a lot left to be done — in schools, in families and in all the other areas of our lives.

But wouldn't we all benefit from having our schools, and all the other settings in our communities, become places where people work together cooperatively, respect each other, take responsibility for doing their fair share and richly reinforce those around them with respect, caring, interest and good humor?